7. THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE MASS

Kenneth Ingram, Barrister-at-Law

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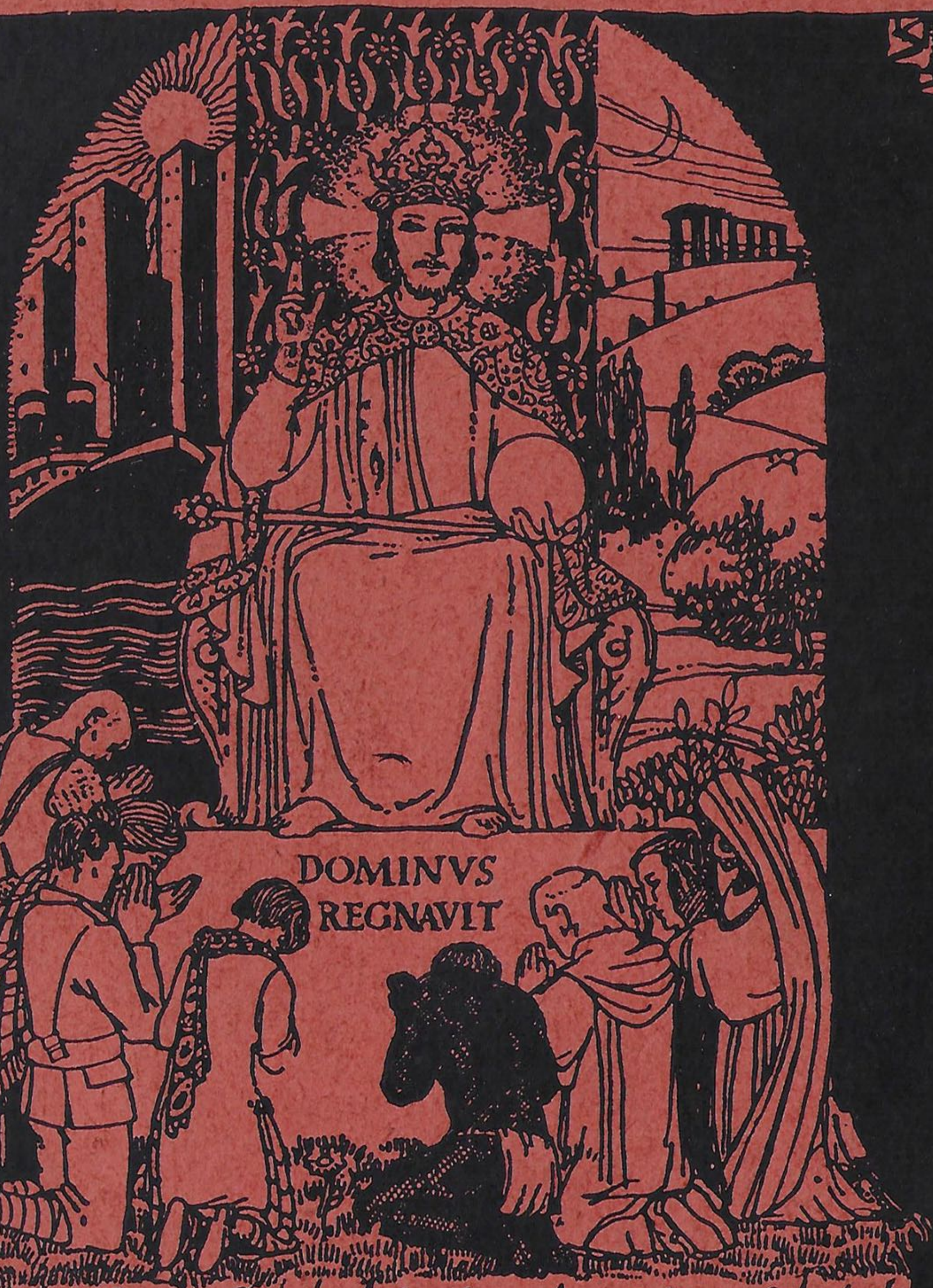

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THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE MASS

BY

KENNETH INGRAM

AUTHOR OF "THE ADVENTURE OF PASSIONTIDE," "THE SYMBOLIC ISLAND," "ENGLAND AT THE FLOOD TIDE," ETC.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The primary vocation of the Catholic Church is to live, and so to reveal to the world, the true life—the life of Sonship and Brotherhood. Nothing can be allowed to interfere with this, its first duty. The Catholic Creed proclaims "the Truth" in the power of which we can live "the Life" and follow "the Way."

It is quite true that our Lord equipped his Church with no political or economic doctrine. But he did equip it with an ethical principle which was bound to have an almost revolutionary effect on all human relationships, social, individual, national and international. This principle is that God is no respecter of persons. In his sight each person—of whatever class, colour, strength or capacity—has an equal and absolute spiritual value. No race or group or individual is entitled to treat any other race or group or individual chiefly as a means to its own satisfaction. All exploitation of one another is sin, incurring God's judgment.

It is undeniable that our industrial and international systems have largely ignored the law, and nothing is so urgent to-day as that Christians should re-study and re-accept it, and apply themselves energetically to its re-application. We do not want to "introduce our politics into our religion," but to re-introduce our religion into our whole life. To help towards this is the purpose of these tracts.

It is also true that the Christian doctrine of the divine origin of all human faculties and activities issues in a Christian conception of Science and Art, of Health and Sex, to which these tracts seek to give some expression. May God's blessing rest upon them!

December 29th,
1924.

Charles Gore

THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE MASS

I

EVERY age has its peculiar tendencies, and therefore its peculiar dangers. One of the tendencies of the present period is to regard spiritual life as separate from the concerns of the secular world. Religion has been totally disestablished from social affairs. It has been relegated, even by religious people to a distinct compartment, and it is almost an impertinence if anyone seriously suggests that it involves certain obligations in the political, or the economic, or the domestic sphere. As a theoretical principle the dependence and interrelation of one with the other will probably be admitted: but most people would hesitate to put the principle into practice. The well-instructed Catholic, for instance, is at once ready to appreciate the mystical teaching of the Mass: he is aware of its significance as a sacrifice and a eucharist, and he responds to the devotional obligations which the Church has taught him to be the necessary and actual outcome of our Lord's sacramental presence. But such a phrase as that which is the title of this pamphlet rings unfamiliarly in his case. It is almost foreign to his mind. He can hardly conceive of this focus of Catholic worship possessing an actual social

significance. It seems to him to belong to a world which is far removed from secular interests, a sacrament which is too sacred to possess any social teaching as an inherent characteristic.

This mental attitude is due to a number of causes. Let us examine some of them.

The first and most immediate cause is that all organised or institutional religion in this country has suffered in the last fifty years an almost complete divorce from the allegiance of the general public. Our fathers would as soon have stayed away from church on Sunday mornings as they would stay away from their families on Christmas Day. Church or chapel attendance was a uniform convention, and a man who remained outside was regarded with suspicion, as being peculiar and not quite genteel. To-day, the whole of this order is reversed. There is no social obligation of any kind to attend any place of worship, or to profess any kind of religious adherence. It is far more normal for a man to stay in bed late on Sunday mornings than for him to get up and go to church. In many ways this diminution of church attendance is a profound blessing: but it possesses several serious dangers. And one of these is that professing Christians, finding that they have lost the support of convention and are surrounded by people on all sides to whom Christianity means nothing, keep silent about their religion. They hide it very much under a bushel. And consequently they are inclined to shut off their social life, where they feel that their religious profession must be kept in the background, from their spiritual ideals. They have learned the unwisdom and the undesirability of flaunting their prayers and fastings and almsgivings before the multitude, but they have reacted too far.

They have forgotten that the Catholic religion is essentially a social responsibility.

That is one cause. Another is that, as Englishmen, our religious tradition, and particularly our Anglican tradition, has come down to us through what we call a Victorian setting. Now, among many good and many evil characteristics, there was one outstanding feature of Victorian behaviour: it placed an enormous emphasis on the outward appearance. The Victorian loved to repeat the maxim that "manners maketh man." He worshipped intensely at the shrine of respectability, and he regarded no sin so deadly as the sin of being found out. It was without any sense of hypocrisy that the slum landlord, who made his money out of the unspeakable misery of his overcrowded tenants, or the prosperous director, who was coining gold from the sweated labour of his employees, said his prayers into his tall hat at Sunday Matins and paid regularly for his family pew. We have learned to appreciate the insincerity of such an attitude. But are we free from all such taint? How many Catholics who regularly fulfil their obligation of attending Mass on Sundays, have failed even to realise that their obligation carries with it immense responsibilities which cut into the very heart of their position in the world of business, of pleasure, and of home? This failure will, perhaps, be revealed as we proceed further with our inquiry.

A third cause must be traced in the immense influence which Protestantism held over all English religion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an influence from which we are only now beginning to extricate ourselves. The Protestant doctrine that none must come between the individual and his God, and that the individual private judgement

must be the supreme authority, gave an inestimable impetus to the economic doctrines of individualism. The English people almost entirely lost the sense of corporate obligation in religious, in economic, and therefore in social affairs. We are being forced by various circumstances to revise our individualistic ideas. But we learn slowly to get back to the Catholic proportion, and many of us still believe that the sole legitimate purpose of a business is to make profits at the expense of the community.

II

We pass on, therefore, to an examination of the social claims of Mass, in the light of the evolution of religion in general and of the Catholic religion in particular.

All primitive religion is based on the institution of sacrifice. The victim was supposed to contain, or to represent, the god of the tribe or clan, and the killing of the victim set free the life of the god so that he might become blood kin with his people. The common meal which followed implied a share in the life of the god: in its crudest form, the god was fed by the offering, but there was also the consciousness that those who partook became mystically united in a family as children of the god whose blood they drank. Even where animal sacrifices were unknown, and the offering was simply one of corn or fruit, the same idea was present. The sacrifice and communion were essentially a consummation of the unity which bound the participants together.

As we mount higher in the grades of religion the same principle develops in intensity and purity. Judaism, which as the spiritual ancestor of Chris-

tianity, specially concerns us, was essentially the religion of a family. The Passover was not only symbolically a mystical act; it was linked by the most intense and precious national association to the deliverance of God's own people from the bondage of Egypt. It was the eternal witness of the power of Jehovah to lead his people out of prison, in defiance of the mightiest forces of the world, into the Promised Land of freedom. And consequently it marked the most sacred of communal fellowship. All Jews who partook, and still partake, of the feast are bound together in a brotherhood which time and persecution have been powerless to weaken. Though the Jews, by force of circumstances, have been driven into all parts of the world, they have retained a more intense national spirit than that which possesses any of the geographically compact races. The Gentile still remains outside the Holy of Holies.

The institution of the Mass came strictly from the observance of the Passover, and our Lord emphasized to an even greater degree the intense comradeship to which the Apostles were binding themselves by their communion. So great was this emphasis that the union which our Lord set before them rises at times to heights beyond our comprehension. He knelt and washed his Disciples' feet. He consecrated his Church by this eternal sacrifice, not simply as a family, but as One Body which the gates of Hell could never disintegrate. When he prayed that they might "all be one," he interceded not merely for a unity of visible organization, but for a complete identity in himself, so vital and so complete that we can but dimly appreciate its significance.

At first the Catholic Church carried out these principles to a very practical extent. The early

Christians observed an entire system of communism. They shared all property in common, they withheld nothing, they were ready to lay down their lives for their brethren, and to face persecution and torture as members of one family. In the earliest days of a small community these ideals are less difficult to realise. A hostile world is one of the most effectual means of linking a brotherhood together. Where it may cost martyrdom to join the brotherhood the indifferent obviously will not want to join. Nothing is more sacred than the ties of common suffering. Indeed this phase has its peculiar dangers, for there arises the tendency to close the doors against the outside world, to become over-sectarian, to create a family which is rigidly self-contained and exclusive. The first problem which the Church had to face was this desire to renounce all responsibility for, or association with, the Gentile world. But Christianity was too great a force to degenerate into a Judaistic sect. Through St. Paul and the other missionaries it swept out into the furthest corners of the civilized world. The Gospel was to be preached to all peoples. The Mass was to be the inheritance of all who heard the call of our Lord. "And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men unto me." Christmas led inevitably to the great festival of Epiphany.

With the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the predominant religion the dangers were reversed. It is unnecessary to trace this gradual evolution, for we see the results in our world of to-day. A universal and tolerated Church, made up of differing races, of all sorts and conditions of men, of endless classes and varying degrees of social position, began to feel herself too large to be one body, except in name. No longer did

conversion to the Catholic Church involve the possibility of persecution and torture and death; on the contrary, the Church was able to persecute those who refused to become Christians. No longer had Mass to be offered in the catacombs, in the hidden places and behind the closed doors, for fear of the world; the world came to Mass, and could be forced to come to Mass. No longer was Cæsar the enemy, whose vengeance banded together the little society of believers with the indissoluble tie of martyrdom and peril; the Church could invoke the arm of Cæsar and enforce its decrees by the police force of the State. No longer had the pioneer missionary to wander alone, spurned by a hostile world, without a place where he might lay his head, begging his alms, and living a life of sheer faith; he could be protected from danger by the imperial power, any insults he suffered could be avenged by a military expedition, and his material wants could be supplied by the vast resources of expanding civilization. The second phase had been reached, the phase of popularity and universal support.

It was the genius of the Catholic Church that she was able, to some extent, to combat these immense dangers. She failed humanly: but she preserved the social ideal spiritually by grouping herself in layers of comradeship. She offered her outer courts to the Gentiles, but she preserved the sanctuaries of the inner circles of devout men and women. She called still nearer to the intimate fellowship of Christ her secular priesthood, and, in the West, emphasized the obligation of the celibate life and spiritual fatherhood, in order the more fully to realise that intimacy. Finally she set her secret heart in the religious communities of men and women, where in the cloister

there remained the communal obligation and the complete family, so that those who were called to enter, literally forsook all and followed him.

III

We have seen how gradually this second phase passed, and how the world once more renounced religion as a convention. It is no longer the case that to be a Christian is a badge of normal citizenship. It is so easy for anyone to cease to be, or to refuse to become, a Catholic that, in the ordinary course, a man who embraces the Catholic religion does so of his deliberate accord. This does not nowadays involve a likelihood of persecution, or, in most cases, of ridicule or odium. Public opinion is tolerant and indifferent. But, though this later development should make for the revival of the family sense in the Catholic Church, and therefore of the social obligations inherent in Catholic worship, we have seen that there are still causes at work which hinder this realization. Let us see where we fail in this respect.

And, to do this, let us first recall of what those obligations consist.

The Mass is a corporate act. It is the act, not only of the priest, but of all who worship in the church with him. It is the forging of a bond between men and women, boys and girls, in this sacrifice of love, so that they become, not merely separate individuals of a family, but actually members of one Body, of Christ. And this is a sacramental reality. It involves, that is to say, not merely a spiritual fellowship which has no place in the social world, in the concerns of material welfare and existence; it is the perpetuation of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, so that this marriage

of every Catholic to him and in him, permeates each circumstance and incident of our physical life here and now. It is difficult to convey a sufficient emphasis of truths which transcend language. But, in plain words, we are, by the act of Mass, bound together by ties which are greater and more complete than any other bond of association.

How far are we alive as fellow-beings at Mass to these realities? How far have we forgotten the sacred ties to which Mass inextricably commits us? One way in which we may usefully set ourselves the task of answering this question is to compare our modern attitude to Mass with the attitude of the Disciples. We see the common ground of faith, our adoration and theirs at the perpetual incarnation and sacrifice of the Risen Christ, present in his divinity and humanity under the forms of bread and wine. But to them Mass had a further significance. It was the feast of the Kingdom of God, that kingdom which, perhaps in their minds, was so soon to prevail over the kingdoms of the world. This intense significance of the Kingdom of God is something which has almost been wiped out of the average Christian conception. The early Church expected the immediate victory of the kingdom, and, no doubt, this messianic belief was still affected by a political application, by the idea, for example, that our Lord in his speedy return would visibly overthrow the power of pagan civilization. In our desire to avoid such interpretations we have swung to the opposite extreme. We have lost all idea of the Church militant as the outer court of the Kingdom of God on earth. If we had done so we should never perhaps have allowed schisms to tear the seamless robe. It is essential, therefore, that, in the work of Catholic recovery, we

should win back this realization, this sense of the Mass as the sacred rite whereby we are bound as subjects to an actual kingdom, the membership of which compels us, by its very nature, to view life from a greater height than the pettinesses of jealousy and controversy and caste and racial prejudices can imagine.

IV

Let us test, then, where we fail.

We begin with the smaller units. We are grouped now under a parochial or congregational system. We assist at Mass more immediately at our church with our own circle of fellow-worshippers. How far do we love, or even help one another? Do we observe any of the essential obligations of relationship? A brother or sister falls seriously into sin. Do we try to sympathize with their failure or assist them to regain their footing? Are we contemptuous of their lack of education, their bad taste in dress, their moral deficiencies? Our own church, is it a parish hearth, the centre of a spiritual domesticity? Does it stand out as a beacon-light of affection and mutual sympathy? Or is it true that the average parochial congregation is a notorious hotbed of gossip and slander and petty jealousy?

We pass to the wider responsibilities.

We are linked to the fellowship of the whole Catholic Church, whether our unity is visibly or invisibly realized. Do we prefer generosity in our differences to controversy and hostility? Within our own immediate Communion do we face our divisions in the spirit of Christ? Is the whole Church so practically the One Body that it is the greatest of forces for international peace and goodwill? What

was our record in the recent war? What is our influence in post-war problems and industrial struggles? "That they may all be one": is that even the purpose which we desire to fulfil?

And there is the world outside the Church, and outside even the bounds of the widest Christian allegiance. Our responsibility does not end within the family. Our Lord ate and drank, not only with his own Disciples, but with publicans and sinners. Have we even troubled to make ourselves aware of the conditions of our fellow-men, of overcrowding, of starvation, of vice and crime and ignorance of Jesus Christ? Have we lifted one little finger to make the world better and happier than it is? By these things chiefly shall we be judged. The responsibilities are so immense that sometimes we may feel they are too vast for us to undertake. But there is no one who can excuse himself from taking his own comparative share. The final message which Bishop Weston gave us as the climax of the Anglo-Catholic Congress of 1923 stares us in the face. We have found Jesus in the Tabernacle: we must seek him in the slums.

V

The difficulty in all such issues as these is, having agreed as to the principle, to agree as to the methods by which it can be put into practice.

We have tried, in this brief outline, to gauge a wider vision of the social implications of Mass. If we have gained the vision we embark at once on the difficult task of coming down into the plains and applying the message which we have heard.

But we have dwelt almost entirely on the principle, because it is the principle which we, as Catholics, have

so largely lost. Unless we learn to see the Mass, with its implications, in this wider vision, we shall be immersed in the smaller concerns of religion, whenever we seek to apply it to our social needs.

To conceive of this Kingdom of God on earth is not to belittle the still greater spiritual obligations of religion. The Mass has only a social message because it is a sacrament which brings down the spiritual realities to the level of our material world. Without the spiritual inspiration the social application becomes mere political social reform, mere humanitarianism, a work of a certain value, it is true, but an ideal which is as nothing before the vision which the Mass gives us. Our social obligations are only of value, from a Catholic standpoint, because they are an application, not because they are an end in themselves.

It is this difficulty which further accounts for the reluctance of Christians to apply their religion to social concerns. We hear so often the complaint: "We must not mix up religion with politics." And that is true to a degree. We must not harness the Church to the wheels of any one political party. But we must, because we are fellow-subjects of the Kingdom of God, work through our various political parties, our business and our personal environments, for the social needs of the world. Everyone who is a Catholic should, because he is a Catholic, strive as Conservative, or Liberal, or Socialist, or, if he is attached to no party, through the channels in which his life is naturally cast, to minister to the world as well as to himself. It is almost as great a contradiction to follow a career of spiritual selfishness, to concentrate only on our own salvation, as to spend our energies, as the non-Christians do, on social reforms which have no spiritual inspiration before

them. Because the Catholic religion is essentially sacramental, it must be expressed, both by spiritual grace and by outward form, in its contact with the social world.

These are the double responsibilities. We must think not only of the Mass on its devotional side, but also in its social application. We must learn to regard, like the early Christians, the Church on earth as the Kingdom of Christ, a body from which is poured out the influences of love as against the enmities of the world, of peace as against racial warfare, of liberty as against militarist aggression, of humility against mere snobbishness and caste selfishness, of purity against vice and lust. The Church should be the store-house of these forces. For these are the fruit by which men shall know her.

And this leads us to a final consideration. The world, it is true, understands the significance of the mystical comradeship of Mass even less than do Catholics. Yet the world will instinctively point to this significance by judging the failure or the success of the Catholic revival by whether Catholics fail or succeed in carrying out their wider social obligations.

And the world is right.

It is amazing to reflect how often we slip into the narrow mental attitude of supposing that the Catholic religion is merely an ecclesiastical taste. We are accused, and sometimes rightly accused, of being so absorbed in petty controversies and tiny parochialisms, that we leave to the unbeliever the work of attempting to rebuild a better and saner world. We look on at him from our sanctuary, and criticize or occasionally applaud him. But we should be with him, working in our shirt-sleeves, sweating with the labour at which he toils, precisely because we possess our sanctuary.

We have each our own vocation, our own field of duty, our special work in the world, great or small. And it is by our contribution that the world will judge us. We may convert the whole Church of England. We may restore High Mass to St. Paul's Cathedral, and reunite the Churches of West and East, and see a Corpus Christi procession marching down Whitehall. Those will be great achievements, great even though the world is unconvinced. Nevertheless, in spite of such achievements, we shall have failed if we have not carried our social message to the world.

The worst thing which could happen to the Catholic revival would be that men could say of it: "These people are too absorbed in themselves to care about the conditions of the world outside." That is the issue on which the world will judge us.

Can we be large-minded enough to face these immense probabilities? We can if we look into the face of our Lord present in Mass. For in that presence we are caught up into the heights which transcend the tiny grooves in which we tend to be enclosed. We see that the parish of the Church is bounded by no locality of race or class. We realize that the Mass is not a service of private prayer said within four narrow walls, but is the very heart of Christ, embracing to himself all peoples, all needs, and all social service.

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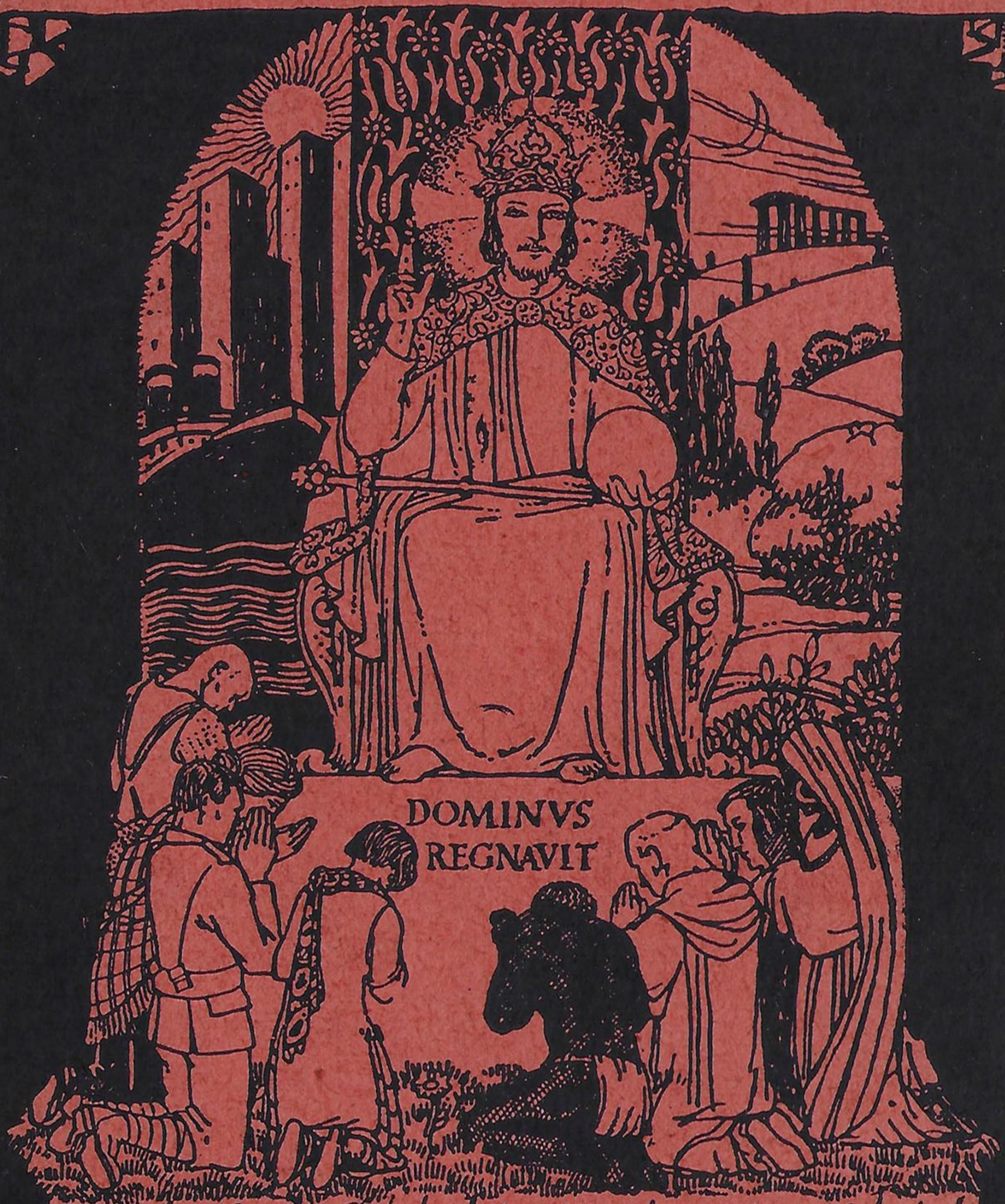

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